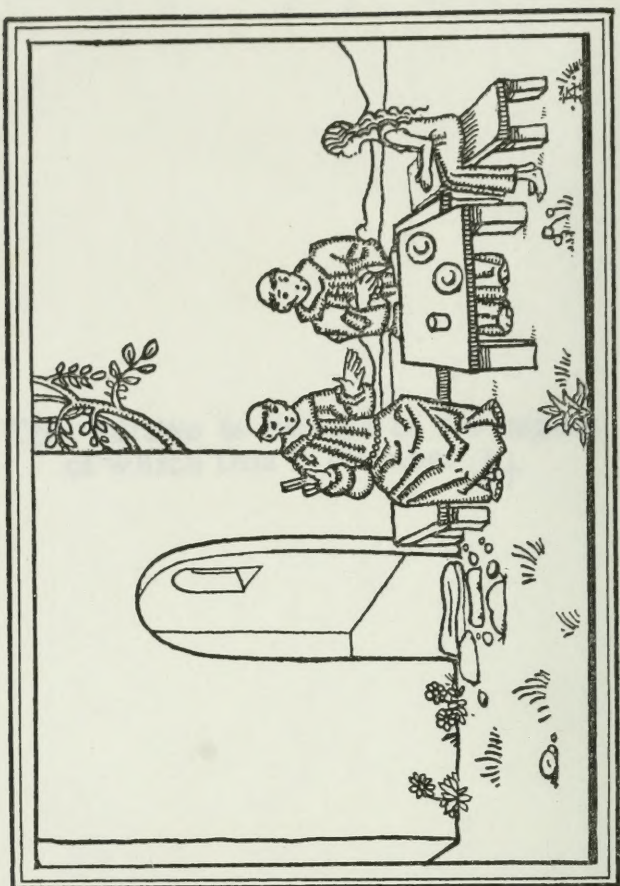


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ABRAHAM

A play by
(ROSWITHA) Roswitha
The Nun of Gandersheim.

Translated from the original
Latin into English prose by
Richard S. Lambert,
and illustrated by
Agnes Lambert.

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ROSWITHA.

The authoress of this play, Roswitha, was born of noble family about the year 935. She entered the Benedictine nunnery of Gandersheim in Saxony, and there composed several narrative poems on religious subjects, an epic celebrating the deeds of Otto the Great, and six dramas after the model of Terence - all in Latin. There is no evidence that any of them were ever acted.

The text from which the following translation has been made is that of C. Mangin published at Paris in 1845.

ABRAHAM.

Dramatis Personæ.

Abraham))
Ephraim)) Hermits.
Mary -) Abraham's grandchild.
A Friend of Abraham.
The Master of an Inn.

Scene - Near Lampsacus on the Hellespont, and in the town of Assos.

FIRST SCENE.

A desert place near Lampsacus. Outside Ephraim's cell. Ephraim is sitting. Abraham approaches him.

ABRAHAM. I say, Brother Ephraim, my fellow-hermit, could you manage to spare me a moment now for a talk, or would you rather I waited till you have finished your psalms?

EPHRAIM. All our talk should be a psalm in praise of Him who has promised that when two or three are gathered together in His name, there will He be in the midst of them.

AB. I have come to talk of nothing but what, I feel sure, is in accordance with God's will.

EPH. In that case, I would not put off our talk for a moment. I am entirely at your service.

AB. I have stirring in my mind a scheme of which I am most anxious to get your approval.

EPH. Well, we are bidden to be of one mind and one soul with one another; & so you and I are bound to have the same

aims and desires.

AB. I have a grandchild, quite a little girl, who has lost both her parents; and I feel so sorry for the poor little orphan that I love her perhaps too much, and am wearing myself out with continual worry on her behalf.

EPH. And what have you, who have overcome the world, to do with its worries?

AB. My only real trouble is a fear lest her purity and loveliness may somehow become soiled by the taint of sin.

EPH. Who could blame you for such a fear?

AB. No one, I hope.

EPH. How old is she?

AB. She will be eight next year.

EPH. She is very young to be an orphan.

AB. That is why I am worried about her.

EPH. Where is she living?

AB. In my cell. At her parents' request I undertook her upbringing. As for her property, I decided to distribute it among the poor.

AB. That is right. The spirit that aspires to Heaven must despise mere worldly wealth.

ABRAHAM.

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AB. I long with all my heart to betrothe her to Christ and to initiate her into her novitiate.

EPH. Most praiseworthy!

AB. Her very name compels me to it.

EPH. What is her name?

AB. Mary.

EPH. So it does. So fair a name well suits the virgin's crown.

AB. I have no doubt that, if we gently encourage and lead her on, we shall find her ready enough to do what we propose.

EPH. Let us go to her, then, and try to make her realise the sense of freedom and peace that the virgin-life gives.

(They go out together.)

SECOND SCENE.

The door of Abraham's cell. Abraham and Ephraim sitting talking to Mary.

ABRAHAM. Come Mary, my adopted child and half of my own soul, will you be guided by my fatherly advice, & by the wholesome counsels of my friend Ephraim here? Are you willing to try

and live a life of unstained chastity, in order to follow in the footsteps of her who was first of all virgins, her whom in name you already resemble?

EPHRAIM. Yes, my daughter, it could never be right that you - who are destined by the mystical significance of your name to shine forth in Heaven among the changeless stars beside Mary, the Mother of God - you should forfeit that place through unworthiness, and sink to the level of mere creatures of earth.

MARY. I see nothing mystical in my name, and I cannot understand what all these roundabout phrases that you use mean.

EPH. 'Mary' signifies 'Stella Maris', that is, the Star round which the whole world with its inhabitants revolves.

MARY. But why is it called 'Stella Maris'?

EPH. Because it never sets, but is always there to point out to sailors the course they must steer.

MARY. And how can I, a poor frail creature made from the dust of the earth, possibly aspire to the glory which, you say, radiates from the mystical meaning

of my name?

EPH. By keeping your body chaste and undefiled, and your mind pure and holy.

MARY (doubtfully). It is a big task for a human being to claim equality with the stars.

EPH. It is, but if you keep yourself uncorrupted and a virgin, you will be made equal to God's angels. You will be freed from the burden and toil of the body, and there in the midst of the heavenly host, you will traverse space, treading upon the clouds, tracing the circle of the Zodiac, and never slackening your step until at last you sink to rest in the arms of the Virgin's Son, in His Mother's bridal chamber!

MARY. (emphatically). Anyone who rejected a chance like that would be an ass!.... Well, I certainly do despise this world, and am ready to deny myself, if by so doing I can become worthy of the joys and blessings which you describe.

EPH. (turning to Abraham). You see? Here we have an old head upon young shoulders!

AB. By God's grace is it so.

EPH. Undoubtedly.

AB. But still, although God's grace has shown her the way, it would not be wise to leave her, at her tender age, to follow out the promptings of her own will -

EPH. True enough.

AB. And so I think I will make her a little cell close to my own with a narrow door and a window through which, when I visit her from time to time, I can teach her the psalms and other writings of God's law.

EPH. Very proper.

MARY. Father Ephraim, I commit myself to your care and discretion.

EPH. May the Heavenly Bride, to whom you have devoted yourself at this early age, protect you, my daughter, and keep you safe from all the wiles of the devil!

THIRD SCENE.

Four years later. Outside Ephraim's cell. Enter Abraham to Ephraim.

ABRAHAM. Brother Ephraim, whatever fortune I meet with, good or bad, you are always the first person to whom I turn for advice.

ABRAHAM.

II

So then, do not refuse to listen to the complaint I am going to make, but give me your help in my trouble.

EPHRAIM. Abraham, Abraham, what is the matter? Why this extraordinary look of misery on your face? No hermit has ever any right to let himself be worried in mere worldly fashion.

AB. An unspeakable calamity has overtaken me. My sorrow is unbearable.

EPH. Do not weary me with a long drawn-out recital. Explain what your trouble is.

AB. My adopted child, Mary, whom I have looked after with the utmost care for four years, whom I have taken the utmost pains to teach -

EPH. Well, well - what about her?

AB. Oh, dear! She is lost.

EPH. Lost! How?

AB. In a most deplorable way. After her first lapse she secretly ran away.

EPH. And what trick did that old deceiver, the Serpent, employ to tempt her with?

AB. It was an unholy passion she suddenly conceived for a certain false rogue who came along in the dress of a monk

and got to know her by making pretended visits, until he enticed her young, untrained heart into love for him. So she crept out through the window and committed sin.

EPH. Your story horrifies me.

AB. But when the poor girl realised she had defiled herself, she beat her breast, struck her face, rent her dress, tore her hair, and wailed aloud with remorse.

EPH. No harm in that. Such a fall deserved all the tears she could shed.

AB. Yes, she cried and cried again because she felt she was not what she had been.

EPH. Poor girl!

AB. She lamented having broken our commandments.

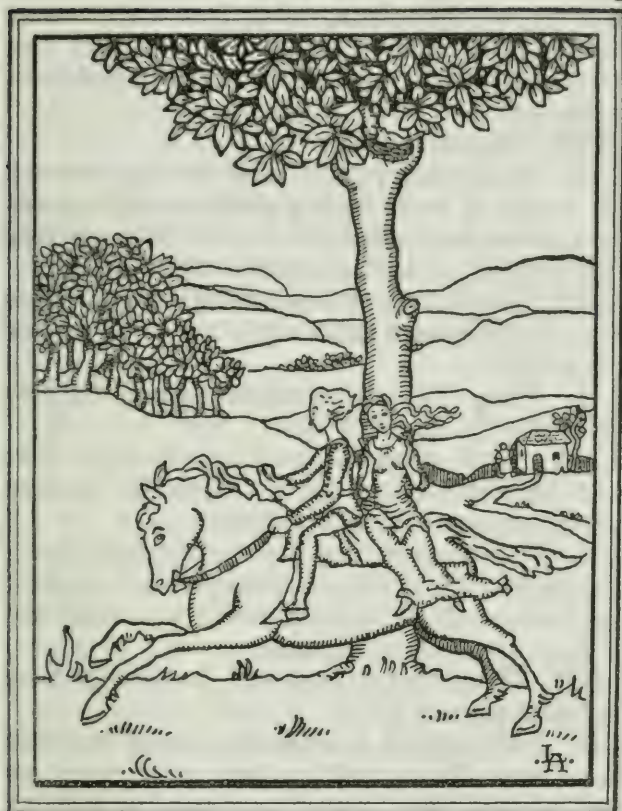
EPH. And well might she lament!

AB. She recalled with her tears all the vigils and prayers and fasts which she had now spoiled.

EPH. Why, if she had persevered in repentance like this, she could have been saved yet.

AB. But she did not persevere. She turned from one evil deed to another.

EPH. I feel quite upset. My limbs fail



me.

AB. Yes, after she had punished her-

self by all this remorse, her spirit was broken by her excessive grief, and she plunged headlong into the depths of despair -

EPH. Oh, what a pity!

AB. And as by now she had given up all hope of ever being able to earn pardon, she deliberately chose to re-enter the world and minister to its lusts.

EPH. Well, never before have the powers of darkness won such a victory over a hermit!

AB. Yes, we have fallen a prey to demons!

EPH. But what a curious thing that she should have been able to escape without your knowledge!

AB. Previously my thoughts had been disturbed by a nightmare which, had I not been blind, would have warned me of her approaching doom.

EPH. What nightmare? I should like to hear about it.

AB. I dreamed I was standing outside the door of my cell, when suddenly an enormous, foul-smelling snake darted forward at full speed, seized a little white dove that was perched by my side,

devoured it, and immediately vanished.

EPH. Your dream was only too clear.

AB. But when I awoke and began to reflect on what I had seen, I was afraid that the Church was threatened by some persecution which was going to lead astray the faithful.

EPH. Your fear was reasonable.

AB. And so I kneeled down in prayer, and besought Him who knows all future events to reveal the meaning of the dream to me.

EPH. Quite right.

AB. At last, two nights afterwards, when I had retired to rest worn out, I thought I saw the same snake fall dead at my feet, whilst the dove reappeared unhurt.

EPH. I am glad to hear that. I have no doubt now that your Mary will come back to you some day.

AB. When I awoke, I felt consoled by this latter dream for the uneasiness which the former had caused me. So I collected my thoughts, and began to recall my pupil to mind. At once it occurred to me, to my sorrow, that for fully two days I had not heard her singing

as usual in praise of God.

EPH. Rather late to remember then!

AB. I admit it was. Well, I hurried out to her cell, knocked on the window with my hand, and repeatedly called her by name.

EPH. And you called in vain, I suppose?

AB. I did not realise that yet. I asked her why she had been so remiss in her devotions; but I got not the slightest murmur in reply.

EPH. Then what did you do?

AB. When I grasped the fact that she had gone, my heart was struck with panic, my limbs shook with terror.

EPH. No wonder. To hear your account produces the same sensations in me.

AB. Then I filled the air with lamentations. I cried out: "What wolf has stolen my ewe-lamb? What robber has carried away my child captive?"

EPH. Naturally you bewailed her loss, seeing that you had brought her up.

AB. In the end some people came along who knew what had actually happened. They told me what I have just told you, that she had deliberately given herself up to the lusts of this world.

EPH. Where is she now?

AB. No one knows.

EPH. Then what is to be done?

AB. I have a trusty friend who spends his time in travelling through different towns and districts. He will not rest until he has got to know where she is.

EPH. And then, if he finds out?

AB. Then I shall change my dress, and make my way to her under the guise of a lover, in the hope that my words may convert her once again, in spite of this dreadful shipwreck she has made of her life, and bring her back safe into harbour.

EPH. Very well; but what will you do if you have meat put before you to eat, or wine to drink?

AB. I shall not refuse them, in case I should be detected.

EPH. Exactly, you will use your discretion. It is only right and proper to relax the strict bonds of discipline for a moment, to win back a soul for Christ.

AB. To find that you agree with me in all this, makes me the more eager to undertake the enterprise.

EPH. He who knows the secrets of the

heart, He who understands the motives of every one of our actions, will never in His sternest hour of judgment condemn as a hypocrite the man who diverges a little from the strict letter of his profession, and is not too proud to do as the weaker brethren do, in order to make more sure of leading back the strayed soul to the fold!

AB. Meanwhile your part of the work is to help me with your prayers, and to prevent my being hindered by any of the wiles of the Devil.

EPH. May the great goodness of Heaven, without which no good thing can come to pass, make your task prosper, and bring it to a successful conclusion!

FOURTH SCENE.

Two years later. Abraham outside his cell. A stranger is approaching, dressed as a soldier.

ABRAHAM. Is not that my friend, whom I sent out these two years ago to look for Mary? Yes, it is.

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FRIEND. Reverend Father, good day to you.

AB. Good day to you, my kind friend. I have waited for you so long that at last I was on the point of despairing of your return.

FR. I delayed my visit till now because I did not venture to cause you fresh worry by bringing you rumours only. But as soon as I discovered the truth, I hurried back to you.

AB. Have you seen Mary?

FR. I have.

AB. Where?

FR. My story is a wretched one!

AB. But tell it to me, I implore you.

FR. She has taken up her abode in a house of ill-fame, kept by a man who is fond of her and treats her well - and no wonder, seeing that every day he draws a substantial income from the lovers she receives!

AB. The...lovers...Mary...receives?

FR. Yes.

AB. Who are these lovers?

FR. There are ever so many of them.

AB. Oh dear! Good Lord! How horrible! Do I understand that she whom

I brought up and betrothed to Christ, has now gone seeking strangers for her lovers?

FR. From time immemorial that has always been the way of the fallen woman, to be continually seeking a fresh lover.

AB. (abruptly). Can you get me a good horse and an officer's uniform? I am going to discard my hermit's dress, and go after her under the guise of a lover.

FR. Here is everything you need. (offering his own horse and coat)

AB. And get me a hat too, please, to hide my tonsure.

FR. (giving his own). A very necessary precaution, if you mean to avoid detection.

AB. And do you think I had better take this piece of gold of mine, and use it to pay the master of the house?

FR. Certainly, for otherwise you will not be able to get an opportunity of speaking to Mary.

FIFTH SCENE.

In the town of Assos, outside an Inn.

ABRAHAM.

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Evening. The Master of an Inn at his door. Enter Abraham.

ABRAHAM. Good evening, worthy master.

MASTER. Who is that? Aha, good evening, my friend.

AB. Have you room for a traveller who wants a night's lodging?

MAS. Certainly. We never turn anyone away from our little place.

AB. That is an excellent principle.

MAS. Come in, and we will get you some supper ready.

AB. I am much obliged to you for your hearty welcome. But there is still something more I want you to do for me.

MAS. Ask for whatever you want, and you shall have it.

AB. Kindly accept this small present and try to arrange that that pretty young girl who, I know, is often about the premises, comes and keeps me company.

MAS. Why do you want to see her?

AB. Because it would give me great pleasure to make her acquaintance. I have so often heard all kinds of people praise her good looks.

MAS. Whoever praised her good looks was telling the truth. Her features are so handsome that she outshines all the other women.

AB. It is for just that reason that I am so much in love with her.

MAS. Well, I am surprised. A doddering old fellow like you sighing with love for a young girl!

AB. All the same, I have come here for no other purpose, but to see her.

SIXTH SCENE.

A room in an Inn: Abraham seated at the supper-table. The Master of the Inn brings in Mary.

MASTER. Come along, Mary, come along; show your good looks to our latest convert!

MARY. All right, I am coming.

ABRAHAM. (aside). Now I shall need all my faith and strength of mind, to see her whom I brought up in the depth of the desert, decked out in the guise of a harlot! It is no time for me to let my face

show what my heart feels. I must bravely keep back the welling tears, and hide my bitter sorrow under a mask of assumed gaiety.

MAS. I do congratulate you, Mary, on your luck. So far it has always been the young men of your own age; now the aged and the dotards are coming too, all joining in the rush to win your love!

MARY. All who love me shall get back a full return for their love.

AB. Come here, Mary, and give me a kiss.

MARY. Besides giving you sweet kisses I will wind my arms tight round your old neck and stroke it.

AB. I should like that.

MARY. (aside). What is this? What strange indefinable scent can it be that I am breathing? Why, it is a scent that brings back to me the fragrance of old times long past, the days of my innocence, when I used to keep away from evil!

AB. (aside). Now, now is the time for pretence. I must press my attentions on her in a joking sort of a way like a wanton young lad, or else my seriousness

might lead to my detection, and that would frighten her into running away for shame!

MARY. (aside). Oh dear! How miserable I feel! How far have I fallen, and into what a sink of iniquity!

AB. (aside). This is no place for a scene. All the guests of the house meet here.

MAS. Mistress Mary, why are you sighing? Why are your cheeks wet with tears? You have been here now for two years. have you not? And I have never heard you sigh like that before, nor seen you behave so gloomily.

MARY. I wish to God I had died three years ago, and never come down to this disgraceful way of life!

AB. (interrupting). Look here, I have not come here to shed tears with you over your sins, but to share your love.

MARY. I was stung by a slight touch of remorse - that was why I spoke as I did. But let us have supper together and be happy. As you have reminded me, this is not the time to be shedding tears over our sins.

(They sit down to supper.)

AB. (at the end of the meal). Thanks to

ABRAHAM.

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your generous care, my worthy host, we have fed well and drunken well. Now give me leave to rise from table and get to bed. I am tired. I wish to refresh myself with a good night's rest.

MAS. Just as you please.

MARY. (to Abraham). Get up, sir, and come along. I will go with you to your bedroom.

AB. Good. Nothing would have induced me to leave the room without your company.

(They go out.)

SEVENTH SCENE.

A Bedroom in the Inn. Enter Mary and Abraham.

MARY. Here is a bedroom that will just suit us, and a bed too with quite good blankets on it. Sit down, and I will take off your boots for you, to save you the trouble of doing it for yourself.

ABRAHAM. First of all, fasten the bolt of the door, so that no one can get in.

MARY. Do not worry about that. I will



see that no one gets in here easily.

AB. (aside). Now is the moment to throw off my disguise and show who I am. (He does so.) Mary, my adopted child and half of my own soul, do you recognise me? Me, your old friend, who brought you up with a father's love. who betrothed you to the only-begotten Son of the King of Heaven.

MARY. Oh, goodness! It is Abraham, my father and my master, speaking!

AB. What has befallen you, my daughter?

MARY. Deep, deep misfortune.

AB. Who was it deceived you? Who led you into sin?

MARY. He who made our first parents fall.

AB. Where is that angelic life that you once led among us?

MARY. Lost, utterly lost!

AB. Where is your girlish modesty? Where is that wonderful purity you used to show?

MARY. All gone.

AB. Unless you repent, what reward can you expect for all those labours of fasting, praying and watching that you

once performed? When the time comes and, like an angel fallen from heaven's heights, you are plunged into the nether depths of hell!

MARY. Oh! Oh!

AB. Why did you despise me? Why did you desert me? Why did you not tell me of your disastrous fall? For then dear Ephraim and I would have done penance, full penance, on your behalf.

MARY. Once I had fallen into sin, I did not dare, defiled as I was, to approach your saintly presence.

AB. But has there ever been anyone altogether without sin, except only the Virgin's Son?

MARY. No.

> AB. It is human nature to sin, but to persevere in sin is of the devil. It is not the man who suddenly falls by the way who deserves condemnation, but the man who fails to rise up again at once.

MARY. Oh, what a wretch I am!

(She falls at his feet.)

AB. Why fall down? Why lie motionless on the ground? Get up again, and listen to what I have to say.

MARY. I fell because I was seized with

panic. I could not bear the burden of your fatherly rebuke.

AB. But think of my affection for you, and put aside your fears.

MARY. I cannot.

AB. Was it not for your sake that I left the home I love, my solitary cell, and almost entirely gave up my usual habits of self-discipline? Have not I, a professed hermit, for your sake kept company with roysterers and, to avoid risk of detection, even cracked jokes with them - I, who have so long practised silence? But why do you look down and keep your gaze fixed on the ground? Why do you refuse to answer me and converse with me?

MARY. The consciousness of my own guilt makes me dumb. That is why I dare neither lift up my gaze to heaven, nor contaminate your speech with my own.

AB. Do not lose faith, daughter, do not despair. Rather, rise up out of the depths and put your trust in God.

MARY. It is the enormity of my sins that has cast me down into this despair.

AB. Your sins are grievous, I must ad-

mit. But the mercy of heaven is mightier than all the creatures of this world. And so shake off your misery, and make what use you can of the little time left you for repentance. For where there is abundance of wickedness, there too is found the abundance of God's mercy.

MARY. If only there was the smallest chance of my deserving pardon, I would prove my repentance with all my heart.

AB. (irritated). Do spare me now, after all the exertions I have made on your behalf. For goodness' sake drop this attitude of hopeless despair, which I am certain is worse than all your misdeeds. To despair of God's willingness to take pity on sinners, is to commit a really unpardonable sin. For just as the spark from a flint cannot set the sea on fire, so the bitterness of our sins is utterly powerless to alter the sweetness of God's grace.

MARY. It is not that I deny the power of heaven's mercy. Only, when I think of the enormity of my own sin, I do fear lest even that power may prove unequal to the required expiation.

AB. On my head be your sin! Only

come back to the place you left of old, and take up again the life that you abandoned.

MARY. Never will I resist your wishes again on any point. Whatever you command, I will obediently perform.

AB. Now I see that you are really and truly the daughter that I brought up. And I am going to love you above everything else in the world.

MARY. I have a little money and some clothes. I am ready to do with them whatever you require.

AB. The profits of sin must be cast away with the sin itself.

MARY. I only thought that they might be given to the poor, or offered up on the altar?

AB. I cannot believe that what has been gained by wrong-doing can be a very acceptable gift to God.

MARY. Then I will not entertain the idea any further.

AB. Sunrise is close at hand. The day is dawning. We ought to go.

MARY. Dearest Father, do you, like the good shepherd, go in front of the lamb you have found, and I will follow

behind in your footsteps.

AB. No, no. I will walk on foot, while you shall ride on the horse, in case the roughness of the track might hurt your tender feet.

MARY. Oh, how am I to answer you? How can I repay you with my thanks? Though I deserve no pity, you do not force me through fear, but lead me on by your sympathy to the path of repentance.

AB. I ask nothing but that you shall devote the rest of your life strictly to God's service.

MARY. Of my own free will I mean to be strict and to devote myself to God with all my strength. Though I may lack the power, the will shall never be wanting.

AB. It will do, if you serve God's will with the zeal with which you have served men's lusts.

MARY. I only pray that, through your good deeds, the will of God may be perfected in me.

AB. Let us hasten on our return.

MARY. Yes. The slightest delay makes me shudder.

ABRAHAM.
EIGHTH SCENE.

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Outside Abraham's cell. Mary and Abraham arriving.

ABRAHAM. How quickly we have overcome the hardships of the journey!

MARY. It is easy to do anything, if your heart is in it.

AB. (pointing). See! There is your empty cell!

MARY. (covering her face). Oh, dear! It was the witness of my wrong-doing. I am terrified of going in.

AB. And no wonder. We must avoid any spot where the Enemy has triumphed.

MARY. Where, then, have you decided that I am to perform my penance?

AB. Go into that further cell over there; then the old Serpent will not find a fresh opportunity of tempting you.

MARY. I have no objection. Whatever you command, I gladly obey.

AB. I will go and find my friend Ephraim. He alone shared my grief when I lost you. Now he must share my joy when I have found you again!

ABRAHAM.

MARY. That is only fair.

(Mary goes into her cell. Abraham goes on to find Ephraim.)



NINTH SCENE.

Outside Ephraim's cell. Enter Abraham to Ephraim.

EPHRAIM. You have not good news for me, have you?

ABRAHAM. Yes, I have - very good

indeed.

EPH. Well? I suppose you have found Mary once more?

AB. Yes, I really have found her. And I have brought her back rejoicing to the fold.

EPH. (amazed). It is the work of God's grace made manifest, I do declare!

AB. Undoubtedly it is.

EPH. I should like to know how she is going to order and conduct her life henceforth.

AB. She is going to order it entirely according to my directions.

EPH. The best possible plan for her.

AB. Whatever I have suggested that she should do, however hard or grievous it was, she has submitted herself to it.

EPH. That is praiseworthy.

AB. She has put on a hair vest and mortified the flesh by continual fasting and watching. Thus by observing the strictest discipline she has forced her tender body to bow to the will of the soul.

EPH. It is only just that the stains of sinful indulgence should be washed out by the bitterness of her sufferings.

AB. To hear her groans rends my heart;

but to see her repentance makes me repent myself!

EPH. That is usually the case.

AB. She is toiling with all her might to become as great an example of conversion as she has been a cause of ruin.

EPH. Very proper.

AB. And she strives to appear all the purer for her past impurity.

EPH. I am really delighted to hear it. I rejoice from the bottom of my heart.

AB. Well may you rejoice, for the angel-hosts of heaven are glad and praise God for the conversion of one sinner.

EPH. Naturally. There is more joy in heaven over the repentance of the wicked than over the perseverance of the righteous.

AB. So we ought all the more to praise God's mercy towards Mary, the less hope we entertained before of her repentance.

EPH. (lifting his hands). We praise Thee, we glorify Thee - we glorify and praise the only-begotten Son, the majesty of heaven, the beloved and merciful Son of God, who will not leave to perish those whom He has redeemed with His

ABRAHAM.

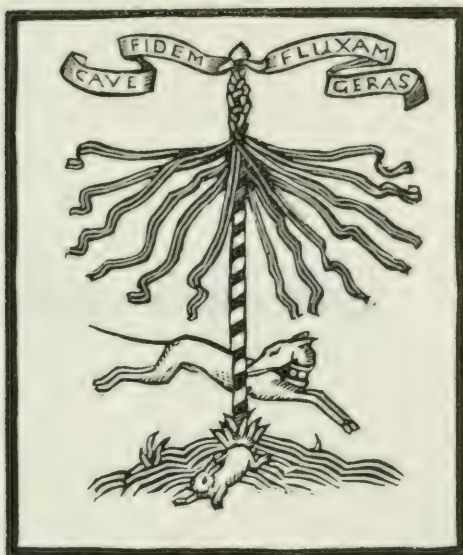
37

holy blood!

AB. (the same). To Him be honour,
glory, praise and thanksgiving - world
without end! Amen.

HERE ENDS THE DRAMA
ABRAHAM WRITTEN
BY THE NUN OF
GANDERSHEIM
ROSWITHA.

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